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3-6-2017

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Recommended Citation

Miner-Romanoff, K. (2017). Online Experiential Learning: Bringing the Courtroom to the Classroom. Retrieved from <https://fuse.franklin.edu/i4blog/22>

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Online Experiential Learning: Bringing the Courtroom to the Classroom

March 6, 2017 | By Karen Miner-romanoff
Educational Technology
Instructional Design

What is Experiential Learning?

Experiential learning (EL) is the “process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Corbett, 2005, p. 479). As Kolb (1984) posited, individuals learn through experience, reflection, thought, and experimentation. Knowledge and understanding are created and refined through the application and transformation of experience. Many scholars and educators agree that experience and active participation can help students connect theory to practice, develop higher order thinking skills, and enhance the educational environment (Burke & Bush, 2013; LaRose, 2011). Much research has indicated that authentic and experiential online learning experiences can lead to greater student success (Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Inan, Yukselturk, Kurucay, & Flores, 2017; McCracken & Guthrie, 2011; Wang, Shannon, & Ross, 2013).

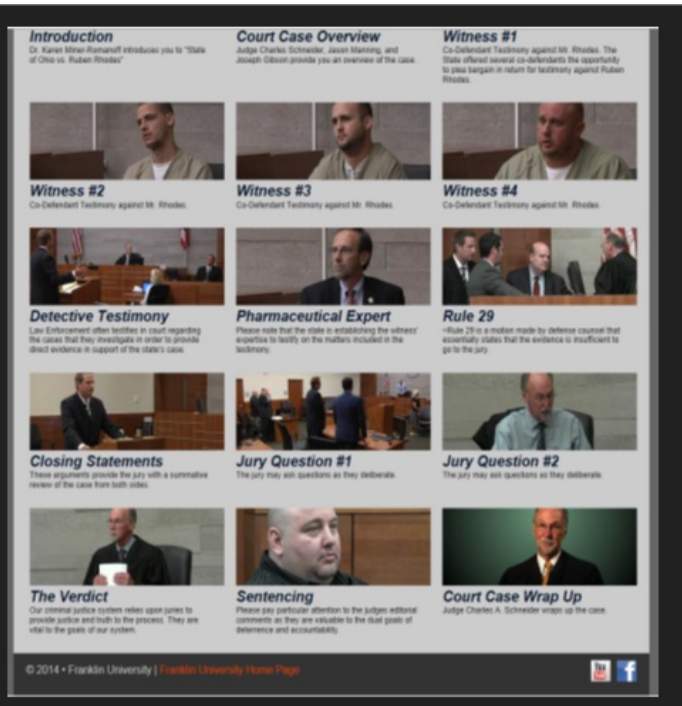
Technological advancements provide the basis for interactive and reflective tools, such as real-world simulations, authentic video-based case studies, and interactive gaming, advance learning outcomes and student-content interactions that increase engagement with the material and have positive benefits for learning (Abrami, Bernard, Bures, Borokhovski, & Tamim, 2011).

However, as Mayes and de Freitas (2013) explained, *technology alone is not enough to imply or prompt increased learning*. Instead, the theory of technology enhancement must demonstrate that **the technology or tools allow or encourage students to interact with the subject matter in ways that are impossible without the technology.**

How We Brought the Courtroom to the Classroom Using EL

At Franklin University, we use these technological advancements to offer our students a window into the criminal justice system. This multi-part case study allows students to virtually enter a courtroom, listen to all the players, and apply theory-to-practice across the systems.

- The courtroom players were extremely enthusiastic and the project grew to 15 parts; including the full trial, interviews of the investigative teams, presiding judge, prosecutors, bailiff and courtroom personnel
- The case study begins with policy and the impetus for new sentencing schemes based upon crime data.



The image above explains a few details about the case study (left), while also showing the case study virtual interface (right).

To create this case study, the authors began discussions with the Common Pleas Court to determine whether Franklin University could bring cameras inside the courtroom to film a criminal trial. The goal was to develop a comprehensive experience for students—a virtual trial that would require experiential application of content to the real world. This virtual trial would begin with criminogenic risks and move through the system to aftercare. The case that was chosen involved a career criminal involved in a complex multistate drug ring. This case allowed inclusion of his history and issues of recidivism, also relevant to criminal justice student learning.

A series of surveys and forums indicated that this tool was highly effective in providing students with the experiential opportunities to enter the criminal justice system. The tools were determined to be easy and applicable, and students reported that the video series allowed them to be directly involved in a full criminal justice experience. You can see some representative student comments below:

“These virtual tools allowed me to watch professionals in the field do their jobs.”

“Seeing all the players, I understood much better how the systems all fit together.”

As Paul (2001) explained, students are not usually exposed to analytical reasoning with different points of view. Nor are students generally required to assess relevant information, draw inferences, and consider various theories or contrasting conclusions. Yet, this type of dialectical and complex thinking is commonplace in many systems. Moreover, criminal justice educators face additional hurdles in that students are often influenced by erroneous media and political myths (Rockell, 2009; Smith, Meade, & Koons-Witt, 2009). Combined, these issues support the need for high quality, experiential, authentic learning experiences for traditional and online students (Fabianic, 2010).

Experiential instructional technology can contribute significantly to optimized learning outcomes (LaRose, 2011). However, as Mayes and de Freitas (2013) explained, technology alone is not enough to imply or prompt increased learning. Instead, the theory of technology enhancement must demonstrate that the technology or tools allow or encourage students to interact with the subject matter in ways that are impossible without the technology.

Interactive, experiential, participatory assignments and activities increase student satisfaction, intellectual development, critical thinking abilities, and academic outcomes (Abrami et al., 2011).

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